



INTERVIEWS, LEBANON, MIDDLE EAST

# The violence, the collapse, the explosion, the utopia

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by Naima Morelli  naimamorelli



There's a certain directness about Randa Mirza, a mix of toughness and softness that's hard to miss. Her gaze is steady and her words often end with a slight pause and a frown, as if leaving a thought suspended, waiting for her interlocutor to interrogate it to the extreme consequences, or perhaps expressing a quiet note of sorrow. Her art feels the same way.

Over two decades, Mirza has built a body of work that spans different mediums, although photography is her chosen tool for chronicling the ever-shifting landscape of Beirut. Her home city, with its complex post-war realities and the resilience of its people, is at the core of her most recent exhibition "BEIRUTOPIA" at the Rencontre D'Arles festival.



The name comes from one of her most renowned photographic series, which looks critically at post-war reconstruction and the erasure of the city's identity. The Arles show, however, brings together seven different series created by Mirza between 2000 and 2022.

"When I looked at the work as a whole, I realised that while each series was developed independently, they all tell one story: the story of post-war Lebanon, linked by the violence that resurfaces at different moments in history," she tells me.

The exhibition is accompanied by a book, a monograph which Mirza herself curated. She sequenced the images carefully, incorporating blank pages to create a rhythm.

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*It's something comparable to a music score.*

"It starts with black and ends with the black of the **2020 Beirut explosion**. I wanted to emphasise the circular nature of violence. That's why the display of

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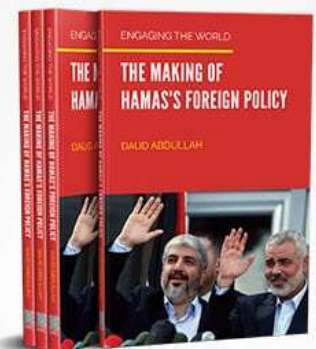
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the artworks in the exhibition is not chronological."

We meet in a busy café in Marseille's La Plaine neighbourhood, a place she enjoys for its multicultural vibe. "I couldn't live in a totally-white city that's too neat or too uniform," she says with a laugh. "Marseille reminds me a bit of Beirut. There's chaos, but it's organised enough. I like the mess; I think it allows for personal freedom and expression in the streets."

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Mirza didn't come from an artistic family, but her path towards art felt natural. Encouraged by her mother who noticed her passion for expression, she studied advertising initially, although she never pursued it as a career. "Oddly enough, a lot of my work connects back to advertising. 'Beirutopia', for example, is all about the way the utopia for a future city is advertised, the fake image that's sold, and the collapse of that illusion."

And indeed her "Beirutopia" series examines Beirut's rapid real estate development, showing the city's billboards, capturing the aspirations projected onto the urban landscape. "I worked on this series for ten years, documenting the construction boom and the moment when it all collapsed," she reflects. A defining moment for her was the explosion in 2020, which marked the end of an era: "It felt like the end of capitalism, the end of neoliberalism."

At the time of the explosion, Mirza was living in Beirut with her girlfriend. "We were photographing the city with binoculars from our apartment during Covid," she recalls. "Then the explosion hit. The next day, I found the binoculars in the wreckage and used them to take pictures of the aftermath." The resulting images, taken before and after the blast from the same vantage point, offer what the artist calls a "stereoscopic view" that captures the rupture in time.

Mirza's artistic process balances intuition with research. "Usually I see in my surroundings an image that catches my attention, and I photograph it," she explains. "But then I dig into it, doing theoretical research to understand why it grabbed me, what it's saying about reality."

Her artistic process blending instinct and investigation has allowed her over the years to tackle complex, politically charged subjects, such as her "Parallel Universes" series, which juxtaposes war photographs from the 1975 and 2006 Lebanese wars with images of tourists.

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*In the series she effectively showcase the coexistence of opposites, multiple universes where horror and leisure, politics and entertainment, coexist.*

"I was interested in the way the two could visually overlap, how they could speak to each other. There's always something happening inside the image and outside of it, a conversation between the photographer and the subject."

Today, her "Parallel Universes" series feels even more relevant, especially in the context of the use of social media and ongoing conflicts like the war in Gaza. "It's unprecedented how people are documenting their own genocide," she points out. "It reminds me of a performance by Palestinian artist Rafeef Ziadah called



'Today my body was a TV massacre'. It was a short video that was that was circulated in 2006 in which she talks like she was answering on the UN. She was on the UN answering humanitarian calls and trying to make a kind of lobbying for the Gaza bombardment."

Mirza says that she was influenced deeply by the way Ziadah was addressing the role of photography and live transmission in documenting atrocities, something that we are faced with today with the Gaza genocide being streamed live on the internet by the very same people who are its victims.

Mirza considers the "Beirutopia" series finished, although it took a long time for her to reach that point. "I photographed the billboards for ten years, always thinking, 'Okay, I'm done,' but then there would be new ones, new construction sites. During Covid, I photographed the finished buildings, and they looked so empty, like billboards themselves, completely flat and without shadows."

This evolution led to her latest 2020 series on Beirut, "We Promise we Deliver", which explores the eerie resemblance between real buildings and computer-generated images. "In these photos, reality looks like something from a simulation," she says. "You could be anywhere: Central Asia, Dubai, North Korea. The buildings, the trees, everything looks so sterile. The only giveaway is the presence of cars."

The new series also touches on the lingering sense of hope, the promise of something real being built, even in the face of collapse. "There's always this idea of utopia, especially in a country like Lebanon, where things are constantly falling apart and we need hope to carry on."

As Mirza reflects on her work and her connection to the city, she's clear-eyed about the limitations of art. "I don't believe art will change the world. I'm realistic about that," she admits. "But I do think art has a role to play in challenging silence. It's through silence that crimes happen, that things go unnoticed. By creating, by speaking out, even in small ways, we crack something open. We don't let the lies we have been fed go unchallenged."

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